

# Drug Intelligence Brief



DRUG ENFORCEMENT ADMINISTRATION  
INTELLIGENCE DIVISION

May 2001



## BELIZE—COUNTRY PROFILE

DEA Office Responsible	Belize City, Belize Country Office
Population	230,000 (as of November, 1998)
Area	122,965 square kilometers (8,867 square miles)
Capital	Belmopan
Type of Government	Constitutional Monarchy with Elected Prime Minister

### Belizean Top Government Officials

Prime Minister	Said Musa
Deputy Prime Minister	Johnny Briceño
Official Head of State	HM Queen Elizabeth II
Governor-General	Sir Colville Young

### Belize: Drug Seizures 1996 - 2000

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Cocaine (kilograms)	87	2,691	40	37.1	14
Marijuana (kilograms)	200	262	1,557	392	249
Cannabis plants eradicated	128,281	294,712	202,803	270,136	162,975
Drug arrests	1,766	1,701	1,743	2,369	2,179

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Belize was settled by British loggers and their Caribbean workers in the seventeenth century, but was not formally declared a British colony until 1862. Belize's modern history began in 1954, when the British administration held territorial elections that were won by the local People's United Party. After protracted negotiations with Guatemala, the British granted independence to Belize in 1981. Guatemala had never formally recognized the British settlement of Belize and maintained that the area was rightfully part of

Guatemala's territory. Guatemala's territorial claim to Belize has overshadowed all other foreign policy issues facing Belize's leaders. During 1999 and 2000, there were several incidents along the border involving confrontations between Guatemalan citizens and Belize security forces, which included allegations of physical abuse inflicted by the Belize Defense Forces (BDF) against Guatemalan nationals.

Belize is unique among Central American countries because of its very small population and history of British colonization. Queen Elizabeth II is the formal head of state, although Belize has its own elected parliament. English is the official language, but the country's population is divided between the descendants of African slaves and the descendants of Spanish-speaking Central American immigrants, who make up half of Belize's population.

## OVERVIEW

Belize, which borders Mexico and Guatemala to the west and the Caribbean Sea to the east, is a transit country for the movement of drugs, particularly cocaine, from South America to the United States. The geography and proximity of Belize to Mexico make Belize an ideal transshipment point for drugs destined for the United States. Belize's vulnerability is exacerbated by its limited police presence and poorly guarded land borders. Air and maritime trafficking are the primary methods of cocaine smuggling for Belizean, Mexican, and Colombian organizations operating along the Belizean coast. Drug traffickers also use the western region of Belize to smuggle cocaine from neighboring Guatemala.

Major Belizean drug traffickers operate along Glover Reef and South Water Cay, both of which are located in southern Belizean waters. They use Ambergris Cay, located near Chetumal, Mexico, to store drug shipments. Traffickers increasingly use maritime operations in conjunction with aircraft "wet drops" (dropping packages of cocaine from a flying aircraft into the water) or off-loads from sea vessels to smuggle drug shipments into Belizean waters. Cocaine, air dropped off the coast of Belize, is transported to the Belizean mainland or Mexico by small "go fast" boats and then stored. The cocaine is later shipped onward to the United States.

## CULTIVATION AND PRODUCTION

Cannabis cultivation, ranging from 500 to several thousand plants, traditionally has been detected primarily in Belize's northern Orange Walk District. More recently, the BDF has located numerous small plantings of cannabis along the entire Guatemalan border. Growers often plant cannabis in remote locations and abandon the plants until harvest time, thus reducing the risk of being arrested during eradication programs. To avoid aerial detection, drug cultivators often interplant young cannabis seedlings between corn plants, or use the "underbrush" method. The "underbrush" method involves removing small trees and bushes, but leaving taller ones in place to hide the marijuana plants from aerial detection.

Squatters from Guatemala plant cannabis on both sides of the poorly-demarcated border between Guatemala and Belize. Cannabis growing in Belizean territory by settlers who enter illegally from Guatemala is only a part of an overall problem that Belize faces. The presence of Spanish-speaking squatters frequently sparks border disputes with Guatemala, as the BDF attempts to evict illegal settlers and to conduct manual eradication of cannabis from Guatemalan-owned plots on the Belizean side of the border. During 2000, Belizean relations with Guatemala were especially tense as a result of two incidents during which Guatemalan nationals residing illegally in Belize were killed in armed confrontations with the BDF.

The Government of Belize neither conducts nor allows spray missions for the eradication of cannabis, but does encourage aerial reconnaissance missions, followed by manual eradication by police and the BDF. The Government of Belize views manual eradication of cannabis fields and seedlings as more effective and environmentally sound than spraying. Manual eradication targeted modest-sized fields ranging from 500 to several thousand plants. The total number of cannabis plants destroyed in 2000 was 162,975 (compared to 270,136 in 1999, and 202,803 in 1998). While still significant, cannabis cultivation in Belize is currently much lower than it was in the early 1980s, when the country ranked fourth in the world-wide production of marijuana and was a major source of marijuana for the United States. In 1983, for example, the Government of Belize eradicated almost 6 million cannabis plants.

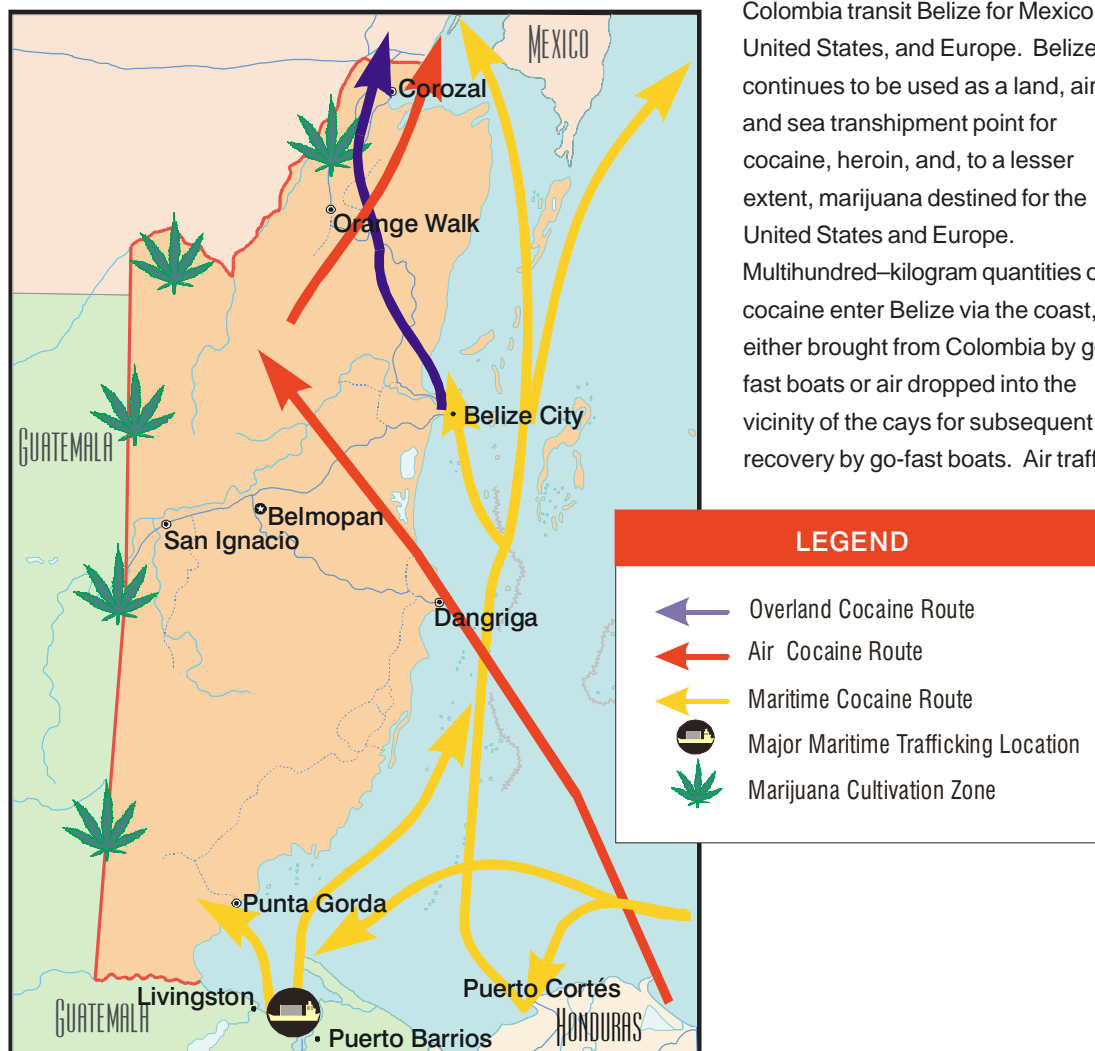
## CHEMICALS/PROCESSING

There is no evidence of trafficking in precursor chemicals in Belize, nor are there many industries in Belize that require the use of precursor chemicals.

## DRUG TRAFFICKING TRENDS

Belize's reputation as a drug transit country is derived from its contiguous borders with Guatemala and Mexico, long unprotected coastline, thousands of cays, and rudimentary infrastructure for combating drug trafficking.

Drugs originating in Colombia transit Belize for Mexico, the United States, and Europe. Belize continues to be used as a land, air, and sea transshipment point for cocaine, heroin, and, to a lesser extent, marijuana destined for the United States and Europe. Multihundred-kilogram quantities of cocaine enter Belize via the coast, either brought from Colombia by go-fast boats or air dropped into the vicinity of the cays for subsequent recovery by go-fast boats. Air traffic



originates from South and Central America, primarily using Belize as an intermediate stop to refuel. Local traffickers provide logistical support and security. While the United States government no longer considers Belize a major transit country for drugs en route to the United States, Belize continues to be a country of concern due to its strategic location and limited law enforcement resources.

Only 14 kilograms of cocaine, including crack cocaine, were seized during 2000 (compared to 37.1 kilograms during 1999 and 40 kilograms seized in 1998). These most recent seizure numbers contrast sharply with 1997 figures, when the Government of Belize seized a record 2.7 metric tons of cocaine, resulting from the capture of two go-fast boats. Belize continues to be used as a transit point for cocaine and other illegal drugs en route to consumers in North America and Europe. Although there have been no significant seizures in Belize itself, the country's location places it in the midst of major trafficking routes through Lago Izabal and Peten in Guatemala; the Bay Islands in Honduras; and Cancun in Mexico. The lack of recent significant cocaine seizures in Belize is not believed to be an indication of a low level of drug trafficking, but instead reflects the country's lack of police and maritime patrolling resources that are needed to conduct effective interdiction. In December 2000, a suspicious Colombian-built 32-foot Eduardono fiberglass go-fast boat was located in Corozal, adjacent to Chetumal, Mexico, presumably after successfully delivering a shipment of cocaine. Although the boat had no cocaine on board, Belizean police officers had information that the vessel had transported cocaine, and the boat itself was a typical go-fast type used to transport ton-quantities of cocaine throughout the Caribbean.

Maritime conveyance by go-fast boats through Belizean waters is the preferred means of cocaine transportation in Belize. These boats originate in Colombia (frequently from San Andres Island) or other Central American countries and usually transport cocaine north into Belizean waters at night. Go-fast boats are refueled or unloaded by support teams, which vary locations for each operation. Drug traffickers in Belize are known to rotate their operations from the northern districts to the southern districts in order to avoid detection. In the southern districts, traffickers use maritime transshipments, and, in the North, traffickers use Ambergris Cay area for aircraft and maritime operations. Maritime operations are used in conjunction with aircraft "wet drops" or off-loads from sea vessels. Support groups provide fuel, boats, safehouses, and alternate transportation for Colombian go-fasts. Cocaine from larger Colombian go-fasts is sometimes transferred to smaller go-fast boats in Belizean waters for transportation to the Belize mainland, or to Guatemala or Mexico.

Drug traffickers also ship cocaine through Belize by land. Most of the cocaine transported overland to or through Belize is hidden in containers or concealed in bulk commercial shipments, such as lumber or concrete. Cocaine smuggled into Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador via maritime vessels also is sometimes shipped overland to Belize or Mexico for onward transshipment. Most of overland smuggling operations into Belize and Mexico use secondary border crossings in the Peten Region of Guatemala. Besides the formal border crossings, there are numerous dirt roads crossing the Guatemala/Belize border which are accessible by four-wheel drive vehicles. The Peten Region still is forested heavily along both sides of the Guatemalan-Belize border and offers a large region to drug traffickers for both the cultivation of cannabis, and for transporting drugs such as cocaine.

Drug traffickers also transport cocaine through Belize and neighboring Guatemala to Mexico via containerized cargo, using both trucks and maritime shipping. Belize has two seaports, Belize City and Dangriga, capable of berthing container shipments. A common practice for drug traffickers is to conceal cocaine in fresh fruit and seafood, both major exports of Belize. Vessels transporting food rarely are checked thoroughly by Customs due to the perishability of the foodstuffs and the inability of Customs to pay for the lost cargo should no drugs be found and the goods ruined.

## DRUG ABUSE

The Government of Belize considers crack cocaine use to be the most significant domestic drug problem because of the associated criminal activities that accompany crack use. International cocaine traffickers pay their Belizean counterparts in cocaine. Local trafficking organizations convert the cocaine to crack, and sell it in Belize City and other urban areas.

Demand reduction began in Belize in 1989 and is coordinated by the National Drug Abuse Control Council (NDACC), which works in close collaboration with the community to provide drug abuse education, information, counseling, rehabilitation, and outreach. The NDACC developed the nation's first comprehensive drug control strategy with the help of the Organization of American States and the European Union.

## MONEY LAUNDERING

Belize is not considered an important regional financial center, but is striving to establish offshore banking, which has opened the country to potential money laundering. Belize is a minor player in international offshore financial services because of its late entry into the financial sector.

The Offshore Banking Act and the Money Laundering Prevention Act were finalized in August 1996. The Offshore Banking Act followed several laws which began building an offshore services sector in Belize, starting with the passage of the International Business Companies Act in 1990 and the Trusts Act in 1992. However, Belizean law enforcement authorities have yet to seize any assets or prosecute a single case under these new laws.

In June 1996, Belize passed its first Money Laundering Prevention Law, which was implemented in August 1996. The law covers individuals and institutions, including banks and offshore banks, that assist and collaborate in money laundering activity. Banks and other financial institutions are required under the law to keep records of all financial transactions for a period of 5 years and to open these records for inspection. Institutions that fail to comply with the new law could have their licenses revoked and also would be subject to a fine of up to US\$50,000. Penalties include fines beginning at US\$25,000 and confiscation of property from those people and organizations violating the law. Penalties also include jail sentences for periods of not less than 3 years. Offenses covered by the law include blackmail; counterfeiting; drug trafficking and related offenses; extortion; false accounting; forgery; fraud; illegal deposit taking; and robbery and theft involving more than \$10,000.

## COUNTERDRUG ENFORCEMENT

The Government of Belize recognizes the country's vulnerability to smugglers because of its geography. It is working to combat drug trafficking, primarily through the BDF and the Belize Police Department (BPD), which increased its staff by five percent during 2000 to 825 officers. The BPD has established the Violent Crimes Counternarcotics Intelligence Unit and the National Anti-Narcotic Intelligence Unit, which focus on drug investigations and drug interdiction. The BPD coordinates the Joint Information Collection Center (JICC). During 2000, the BPD renovated numerous police stations, including the main police station in Belize City.

The Belize Country Office assisted the Government of Belize in reestablishing the BPD's money laundering unit in February 2001. This unit originally was established in 1997 to work in collaboration with the Central Bank of Belize, but its operations remained suspended until 2001.

The Government of Belize has authorized the on-site collaboration of a United States law enforcement officer with the new Counternarcotics Antidrug Unit. The United States Government plans to provide Belize with law enforcement training and technical assistance for the unit's continued operations during 2001.

Belize signed a maritime counterdrug agreement with the United States in 1992. The agreement provides for a shiprider program. Work is underway between the United States and the Government of Belize to add an overflight agreement to the existing shiprider agreement, and also to establish an international asset sharing program. In September 1997, the Government of Belize signed the National Crime Information Center Pilot Project Assessment Agreement which allows the sharing of information and data between the United States and Belize.

Belize joined 19 other Caribbean and Central American countries in signing a memorandum of understanding on the prevention and control of money laundering, which formalized Belize's membership in the Caribbean Financial Action Task Force (CFATF).

Belize has extradited Belizean nationals under the 1972 United States – United Kingdom treaty. During 2000, Belize extradited one suspect to the United States under the 1972 treaty.

## CONCLUSIONS/PROJECTIONS

The sharp contrast between the small amount of cocaine seized from 1998 to 2000, and the large amount seized in 1997, is not believed to indicate a reduction in the amount of cocaine passing through Belize and its territorial waters. Nearly all of the cocaine seized in 1997 came from two go-fast seizures, and no such seizures have been made since 1997.

Belize is one of two countries in Central America that share land borders with Mexico. Increased legitimate commercial traffic between Belize and Mexico will continue to facilitate cross-border drug smuggling. Cocaine traffickers increasingly will utilize Belizean land routes, air space, and territorial waters for drug shipments in the future.

Support from the current government in Belize for international cooperation in cocaine interdiction and cannabis eradication appears to be strong. The Belizean government's ability to follow through with its stated commitment will be critical to preventing Belize from becoming a more important smuggling route for traffickers.

This report was prepared by the Mexico/Central America Unit of the Office of International Enforcement Support. Comments and requests for copies are welcome and may be directed to the Intelligence Production Unit, Intelligence Division, DEA Headquarters, at (202) 307-8726.